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EARLY AGITATION FOR A PACIFIC RAILROAD 1845-1850

The agitation in America for a railroad to the Pacific is coincident with and a result of the opening of China to western civilization. Following the successful completion of the opium war by England, Caleb Cushing had, as a representative of the United States, succeeded in obtaining commercial concessions for his countrymen. This treaty opened five ports to the United States trade and made elaborate provisions for trade between the two countries.¹ This part of history is so well known as not to need repetition. In 1844, Asa Whitney of New York, a merchant but recently returned from China, started an agitation for a railroad to the Pacific in order to shorten the distance to Chinese ports. Whitney had first had his attention called to the importance of railroads in 1830 by riding on the Liverpool and Manchester railroad in England, when a speed was attained of thirty-four miles in forty-two minutes. Twelve years later as he was on his way to China, a Singapore paper fell into his hands announcing peace. His thoughts turned to the advantages of commerce and he gradually worked out his project of a Pacific railway. He resided two years in China and investigated the possibility of extending its commerce.² On January 29, 1845, he presented, through Representative Pratt of New York, a memorial to the house of representatives in which he set forth the importance of the road and the best method of building it.³ The memorial first called attention to the fact that all states above the Potomac were now connected with the great lakes by rivers, canals, or railroads. Across New York there was building a chain of railroads to Lake Michigan. Whitney had carefully investigated the route from Lake Michigan to the Pacific and found it practicable; the distance was 3,000 miles. If the road he advocated should be built the time from Maine to

¹ *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, 14: 93.

² Memorial of Whitney, 1846, in *Senate documents*, 29 congress, 1 session, 4: no. 161.

³ *Congressional globe*, 28 congress, 2 session, 218.

Oregon would be reduced to eight days or even less; the forces of the United States could readily be concentrated over the entire area of her territory and products could be readily exchanged from all quarters. Moreover, from the mouth of the Columbia it was but 5,600 miles to Japan, and so only about nine thousand in all from New York to China. If the railroad were built, the time to China would be shortened to thirty days whereas now the trip took from one hundred to one hundred and fifty. The shortening of the distance would be of incalculable aid to the interchange of commodities of China and the United States. But this was not all. If the road were built, a naval depot could be established on the Pacific and the United States might maintain there a navy that would dominate the Pacific, South Atlantic, and Indian oceans, and even the Chinese seas.

The only way this railroad could be built, the memorial set forth, was by a grant of public lands. Whitney had been over the route and knew that most of the land was of little value; he thought it would require a tract sixty miles wide across the continent to finance the undertaking properly. From the sale of this land the road would be built and if any land remained unsold it was to become the property of Whitney. The estimated cost of the road was \$50,000,000 to which had to be added \$15,000,000 for running expenses until the completed road began to pay expenses. The rates on the road would be low, and surplus money might be given to educational purposes. One of the advantages of the road would be that it would be constructed by immigrants who would thus be drawn away from congested cities and forced to work in the west. The memorial asked that congress make a survey of the route between the forty-second and the forty-fifth parallels, starting from Lake Michigan and coming out at the mouth of the Columbia. In closing the memorial adverted to the fact that by the proposed road Oregon could be definitely tied to the United States, whereas otherwise its future was uncertain.

From the committee on roads and canals came on the last day of the session a short and cautious report signed by Robert Dale Owen, chairman. The subject, it said, had been referred to the committee too late for examination. The scheme was not impracticable and the merits of it certainly deserved attention.

The committee, however, was firm in the belief that if such a railroad was ever built it must be by a grant of public land. No money should ever be granted from the treasury for such a purpose.⁴

This project of Whitney's attracted attention all over the country and at first was widely condemned as a silly and chimerical scheme.⁵ Whitney, however, had no intention of resting his case on a memorial; he organized a vast system of publicity with a view to influencing people's opinions. He wrote letters to congressmen, issued addresses to the people and himself visited all parts of the union advocating his plans.⁶ Soon sentiment began to crystallize for and against him. The south, at first inclined to passive favor, changed rapidly to active hostility as the project became less a chimera. The *Charleston Courier* did not mince its words: it pronounced the project a visionary scheme.⁷ The *Arkansas Democrat* opposed it on grounds that summed up the southern hostility: if the project succeeded it was believed that all the far west trade would go to the lakes and New York. New Orleans was a better terminus and as it was 1,400 miles closer to the coast and the intervening country more fertile, the road might be built over that route for \$5,000,000 instead of \$50,000,000.⁸ The *Daily Union* promised Whitney would be given a patient hearing if he would come to St. Louis, but Lake Michigan was not a proper terminal for the road.⁹ In like manner spoke the *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*.¹⁰ The opposition of the south to a transcontinental railroad so far north was inevitable.¹¹ The building of such a road would mean the economic murder of the south; the western trade for which it was trying would join the Oregon trade to New York. Of all the southern papers, the *Baltimore American* was the only one to be counted as a friend of the Whitney road.¹²

⁴ *Reports of the house of representatives*, 28 congress, 2 session, no. 199; *Arkansas Banner*, July 2, 1845.

⁵ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1845.

⁶ *Ibid.*, July 2, 1845.

⁷ *Charleston Courier*, August 16, 1845.

⁸ *Arkansas Democrat*, December 11, 1846.

⁹ *Daily Union*, October 26, 1846.

¹⁰ *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, November 13, 1846..

¹¹ *Charleston Courier*, January 12, 1847.

¹² *Ibid.*, January 14, 1847.

Even at the north, opinion was divided. In the summer of 1845 Douglas wrote to Whitney objecting to his plan and to the route proposed. He advised Whitney to adopt Chicago as his terminal and to take a route through Council Bluffs and South Pass. Douglas went so far as to publish his plan for a railroad in opposition to Whitney's.¹³ Benton opposed the plan on the ground that the route was too far north to be kept open in the winter time.¹⁴ The *American railroad journal* opposed it for its great cost, which it thought would be \$25,000 a mile. It added the caustic comment on Whitney's enthusiasm that people could believe anything they desired.¹⁵ A Cincinnati paper favored it and complained that people were condemning it without understanding it. Judge Douglas, it said, condemned it for three features, none of which it contained.¹⁶ One week later it set forth the advantages of the road: the railroads from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston would arrive at Sandusky in two years, then they would continue to Prairie du Chien and join Whitney's road. Virginia and Carolina roads would be extended to Lake Erie as would also the Baltimore and Ohio. Natchez, New Orleans, and St. Louis would have branch lines. Then came the remarkable prediction that the railways of the country were bound to supplant the rivers.

In the meantime Whitney himself went west to explore in person the route of the proposed road. Before leaving he wrote a pamphlet to the people of the United States and sent it out to the newspapers asking that they publish it, which they did. This pamphlet contained a public letter on the benefits of the railroad, a copy of the memorial and a report of the committee thereon.¹⁷ Whitney started from New York on June 2, 1845, passed through Buffalo and Detroit, and arrived in Milwaukee with fifty young men in his company drawn from the nineteen states of the union.¹⁸ He proposed to find out by personal inspection if there was a suitable starting point on Lake Michigan between parallels forty-two and forty-five from which a road could be built through public land sixty miles in width. He

¹³ *Illinois State Register*, November 1, 1849.

¹⁴ *Arkansas Democrat*, December 11, 1846.

¹⁵ *American railroad journal*, 19: 249.

¹⁶ *Cist's weekly advertiser*, December 3, 1845.

¹⁷ *Arkansas Banner*, July 2, 1845.

¹⁸ *Northern Gazette and Galena Advertiser*, June 10, 1845.

wanted to ascertain, also, if a railroad to the Missouri was feasible and to estimate the probable sale of land and the rapidity of settlement as the road progressed.¹⁹ From Milwaukee he went overland to the Mississippi, reaching it at Prairie du Chien. At that place he attempted to secure a guide for his further journey to the Missouri but was disappointed and consequently had to determine his own route. He passed through Fort Atkinson and from a map selected a destination on the Missouri to which he directed his steps. He reached the Missouri at "15 miles below the great bend," and five miles from the point he had selected. Here he embarked on the Missouri and with his party, reduced to seven, traveled in log canoes 750 miles down that stream. At Fort Leavenworth he took passage on the steamer John Golong and reached St. Louis on September 19, having been on the Missouri for thirty-one days.²⁰

Early in 1846 Whitney returned to the attack on congress. On February 24, 1846, he sent in a second memorial on his Pacific railway. In the senate it was referred to the committee on public lands and in the house to the committee on roads and canals. This second memorial of Whitney's differed in many respects from that of a year earlier;²¹ it was more definite, showing the evidences of his exploration and increased information; in it he referred to the fact that the lack of time had prevented action on his last memorial and as he had spent the intervening time in exploring and collecting information he felt sure he could now make clear the feasibility of his plan. He told how he first came to have the idea, and then gave the result of his exploration in the fall of 1845. From Lake Michigan to the Mississippi, a distance of over two hundred miles, he found that a railroad could be built with a grade of not more than twenty-five feet a mile. No timber was to be had along the route for the road but the soil was good and would support settlement. The Mississippi he had found bridgeable at Prairie du Chien. From the Mississippi to the Missouri a road could be built with a grade of twenty feet to the mile. The land was still good but there were practically no streams, nor were there rocks for bridging them. No fuel was to be had along the route, and he

¹⁹ *Arkansas Banner*, August 13, 1845.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, November 12, 1845, quoting the *Public Ledger*.

²¹ *Senate documents*, 29 congress, 1 session, 4: no. 161.

was confident the country would never be settled without a railroad. The Missouri was bridgeable in three places only and all these were above parallel forty-two, at the mouth of the Vermilion river, and forty-three, at the mouth of White river. On the Missouri there was no timber above Council Bluffs and very little below it. There was none above parallel forty-three, he had learned from inquiry, and none between the mountains and the Missouri. From the Missouri to South Pass there was a regular ascent of six feet a mile.²²

Lake Michigan was the best starting point for the railroad for many reasons. It was the only place from which a route might be surveyed westward through the public lands; timber was to be had there, the country was already settled, and it had communication with the east over the lakes, canals, rivers, and railroads. Iron could be obtained from Pittsburgh by canal; from the shore of Lake Michigan a course could be run straight to South Pass; and finally, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland were all building their roads westward so that they might soon connect with this point. Even the southern roads to Memphis might easily extend their lines to connect with the same point, and so the whole union would be knit in a compact mass.

Whitney thought now that the good lands for the first seven hundred miles would produce enough to pay the cost of the road to South Pass. Let the president and senate appoint commissioners who, acting with Whitney, could give title to the settlers on the lands. Fifteen years would be required to finish the road and for twenty years after it was finished Whitney agreed to keep the road in repair at his own expense, to carry mail and United States stores free; to carry merchandise at one-half a cent a ton a mile, and under two hundred miles at one-half the price of other roads; corn would be carried at twenty cents a bushel and flour at one dollar and twenty-five cents a barrel. Passengers would be charged one-half the rate of other roads. At the end of twenty years these tolls might be revised; in the meantime the unsold lands should be held in trust. He knew that the Sioux Indians were willing to sell their lands at a low price and the railroad would prove a great benefit to

²² Whitney had been assiduous in reading the accounts of western explorers. Much of his information, he suggests, came from Fremont.

the United States in its dealings with the Indians, inasmuch as it would keep them divided. A map accompanied the report showing the route of the proposed road, and the lines built and building in the United States at that date.

In the senate the committee on public lands to which the memorial had been referred brought in a bill on the last day of July, 1846, setting aside the land Whitney had asked for from Lake Michigan to the Pacific for the railroad.²³ This bill they accompanied with an extended report on the memorial.²⁴ The committee considered the report from twelve points of view. In regard to the power of congress to have the road built, the committee held that the power of congress over public lands was indisputable, no matter whether those lands were in the territories or in the states. As an evidence of the practicability of the road, the committee referred to the reports of Lewis and Clark, and those of Fremont. For the adequacy of the means sought to build the road the committee quoted Whitney's arguments and approved them. They found that the railroad would have the effect of increasing the demand for the public lands and that it would be a benefit to agriculture, manufacture, mining, and both internal and foreign commerce. It would develop the fisheries and the naval power of the United States, it would be of incalculable benefit as a means of transportation, and would build up the entire union by directing hither the trade of China, Australia, and the Pacific islands. An appendix of statistics was added to the report. From the house committee on roads and canals likewise came a favorable report; but determined opposition was encountered and the congress, being near adjournment, did nothing. Benton was particularly outspoken in his opposition.

Whatever critics might say of Whitney's sanity, no one could gainsay his perseverance. Neither the action of the Chicago convention²⁵ nor the non-action of congress daunted him; he kept up his agitation night and day. He had the satisfaction of seeing the whole country become interested in the idea, and the north almost unanimous for the Whitney plan. On August 28,

²³ *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, November, 1846.

²⁴ *Senate documents*, 29 congress, 1 session, 9: no. 466.

²⁵ The Rivers and harbors convention held at Chicago July 4, 1847, had adopted resolutions condemning Whitney's plan.

1847, Congressman Pratt, who had become an enthusiastic follower of Whitney, wrote a public letter to the people of the United States advocating the railroad. He compared it to the first project, which he claimed was impracticable because it would have to be under international control.²⁶ But as the country grew more favorable to Whitney congress became gradually more hostile. Governor Bebb went home from the Chicago convention and sent a message to the Ohio legislature in condemnation of Whitney. His grounds were four: the plan was giving too much money and land to one person; the checks and guarantees were insufficient; the railroad was located too far north; and, finally, the roads at home needed the aid. The *Louisville Examiner* commenting on this message said, "A sensible view; Whitney asks too much just now."²⁷ But in the same month Rhode Island, Maine, and Connecticut sent resolutions to the senate of the United States favoring Whitney's plan.²⁸

The agitation for a railroad over a southern route to the Pacific had its beginning practically in the Mexican war. Before that war the south had been cut off from access to the Pacific because Mexico extended north to parallel forty-two, and even the annexation of Texas in 1845 did not improve matters inasmuch as New Mexico and California remained Mexican. During this early period, then, the south inclined passively to approve Whitney's plan or made only slight objections to it because of its northern location. As a result of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, however, the south in 1848 found an entirely new situation: a southern route was now open to a southern port in the Pacific. This gave rise to an ever increasing agitation for a southern road. There had, of course, been suggestions long before this from southern expansionists. In October, 1845, the *Concordia Intelligencer* had suggested a railroad from Natchez, Mississippi, across the Rio Grande at Praesidio to Mazatlan on the Gulf of Lower California; this idea had been presented to the Memphis convention and had found immediate favor with Gadsden, for whose undaunted optimism no project was too big.²⁹ As relations then stood with Mexico no more hope

²⁶ *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, 17: 386.

²⁷ *Louisville Examiner*, December 25, 1847.

²⁸ *Congressional globe*, 30 congress, 1 session, 15, 19, 51.

²⁹ *DeBow's review*, 3: 475.

existed for a right of way through her territory than through Saturn and the idea bore no fruit. In June, 1847, *DeBow's review* returned to the subject with the preface that at the end of the war it was evident the United States would be able to dictate its own terms, and one of the terms might well be this right of way.³⁰ The road should be built through Natchez, Alexandria, San Antonio, Praesidio, Monclova, Parras, and Durango to Mazatlan. The editor gave six reasons why such a road was better than the Whitney project: it started from a point where river navigation was never interrupted, it was nine hundred miles shorter, the cost of construction would be much less, no snows or harsh elements would have to be encountered, it ran through a region habitable and inhabited and through a land whose mineral products alone would more than pay for the road. This article was followed up the next month by an article of Professor Forsbey of the University of Louisiana, on the same topic, in the course of which he severely criticized the Whitney plan as compared to this one. Whitney replied in October and the controversy excited public interest to a great degree. The Natchez plan, however, was short-lived.

With the continued progress of peace negotiations in Mexico, southern leaders turned more seriously to the question. In the senate on December 21, 1847, T. Butler King, chairman of the committee on naval affairs, wrote to Lieutenant Maury, then at the head of the United States naval observatory at Washington, for his opinion as to the practicability of running a railroad from some southern city on the Mississippi to a Pacific terminal. Calhoun, also, asked Maury for similar information. Maury replied January 10, 1848, in a letter that was destined to be widely influential in the south. He showed by elaborate astronomical data that a southern Pacific port was nearer to China than a northern one, and went on to name Monterey as his choice. For an eastern terminal he fixed upon Memphis as the nearest Mississippi port to Monterey. This road was better than Whitney's road and was better than an isthmus road inasmuch as it would be through United States territory. Maury stated, however, that he knew little of the country between the two cities,

³⁰ *DeBow's review*, 3: 475.

and was not wedded to the two cities named.³¹ This letter introduced Memphis as a contender for the honor of being the eastern terminal for the Pacific railroad and the Memphis project became known as the "Maury plan."

The year 1848 was a busy one for Whitney. The *American railroad journal* on the first day of the year declared itself a convert to his plan³² and essayed his defense in opposition to the scathing attacks of *De Bow's review* of July, 1847. On January 17, 1848, Felsh in the senate presented to that body³³ the third memorial from Whitney for his railroad.³⁴ This third memorial differed from the second as the second differed from the first. Whitney did not ask a cent of money, he said, but would make the survey himself at his own expense. He would build ten miles of the road himself and after it was built would reimburse himself from the sale of five miles of the land while the United States retained the remainder. In this manner he would build the road for the eight hundred miles that ran through the good land; when the bad lands were reached, where the sale of land along the way would not pay the cost of the road, the government should advance the money needed from its share of good lands. At the completion of the road the government should sell him all unused land. The memorial asserted that no other route was practicable and claimed that this road was better than that in Panama, Tehuantepec, or Nicaragua.

This memorial in the senate was referred to the committee on public lands and in the house to a select committee.³⁵ On the third of May, 1848, the house committee reported a bill for the sale of land to Whitney for the railroad.³⁶ The scheme, so ran the report, was a startling one at first glance. The committee thought the road could be built and the power of congress to grant the lands whether in states or territories was unquestioned. The people of the United States were divided in their opinion as to the proper route but the testimony of Fremont

³¹ *Western Journal*, 1: 260. The letter to Calhoun is to be found also in *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, 18: 592.

³² *American railroad journal*, 21: 1.

³³ *Congressional globe*, 30 congress, 1 session, 182.

³⁴ *Senate miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 1 session, no. 28.

³⁵ *Congressional globe*, 30 congress, 1 session, 604.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 congress, 1 session, 716.

seemed to make a clear case for Whitney's scheme. The committee pointed out that according to their bill the lands would be given into hands of actual settlers by the government and not by Whitney. The report was hasty and largely made up of quotations from the earlier Breeze report.³⁷

But the senate committee with Borland of Arkansas as chairman was now hostile and on June 26, 1848, brought in an unfavorable report. They had found the railroad would be of incalculable benefit if built, but with the information at their command they did not see their way clear to bring in a bill in favor of Whitney. Instead they reported a bill for the secretary of war to survey one or more routes for a Pacific railway below the Falls of St. Anthony.³⁸ This killed the plan as far as the senate was concerned. Niles next day introduced a bill to sell land to Whitney, had it referred to a select committee with himself as chairman and on July 7, 1848, brought in a bill with certain amendments. The Niles bill was drawn in conformity with the memorial of Whitney; it provided that Whitney should choose his terminals at any points on the Pacific and select his own route in any way he pleased. The railroad was to be a six-foot gauge and was to be built of iron rails weighing sixty-four pounds to the yard. There were the land provisions for which Whitney had asked and among other things it was stipulated that the road should be begun in two years.³⁹ This loosely-drawn bill brought down the wrath of Senator Benton. His words were vitriolic. He denounced the entire Whitney scheme and ridiculed his exploration, saying that any survey Whitney had made had extended only from one end of the capital to the other. Against such language as this Whitney protested in a letter to Hunt's *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, terming Benton's opposition "boisterous and unparliamentary."⁴⁰ The opposition of Benton prevented the senate from even considering the bill. In this session of congress, however, Kentucky and New Jersey sent resolutions to the senate favoring the bill. New York, Rhode Island, Maine, Connecticut, Tennessee, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, Ohio, Kentucky, Mary-

³⁷ *House reports*, 30 congress, 1 session, 3: no. 733.

³⁸ *Senate reports*, 30 congress, 1 session, no. 191.

³⁹ *American railroad journal*, 21: 674.

⁴⁰ *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, 19: 527.

land, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Alabama all sent resolutions to the house in favor of the bill.⁴¹

In the meantime the *American railroad journal* had gone over to the opposition and a workingmen's convention in New York October 29, 1848, denounced Whitney's plan as "A scheme of gigantic robbery."⁴² But even these things did not discourage Whitney. The attack of Benton upon him in the senate on the occasion of the opposition to the Niles bill caused him to write a letter vindicating himself; he was bold to say that two congressional committees had favored him and eighteen state legislatures had presented resolutions for him.⁴³ Indeed, could a railroad have been built by resolutions, Whitney would have been free from care. The actions of the state legislatures had been almost invariably unanimous. The list as given in a Cincinnati paper consisted of Indiana, Illinois, New York, Connecticut, Vermont, Rhode Island, Georgia, Tennessee, Maine, Alabama, Maryland, New Jersey, Arkansas, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Iowa.⁴⁴

During the year 1848 the plans of Maury and Whitney monopolized public attention, with the south coming more and more to unite on Memphis. There was one point of opposition in the south to Maury's plan and that was New Orleans. New Orleans was facing the prospect of seeing her whole trade diverted to New York and Charleston and was in a decided ill-humor.⁴⁵ She was opposed both to Whitney, whose plan would attract western trade to New York, and to Maury, whose plan would attract western trade to Charleston. It was vital to New Orleans that, losing steadily in the local west, she should in some manner reach after and secure the trade of the Pacific. Out of her dilemma it seemed to New Orleans a way was provided by the plan for a Pacific railway. The project of a railway over the isthmus of Panama was an old one. Upon the acquisition of Oregon, congress had contracted with the Pacific mail com-

⁴¹ *Senate miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 1 session; *House miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 1 session.

⁴² *American railroad journal*, 22: 645.

⁴³ *Merchants' magazine and commercial review*, 14: 527.

⁴⁴ *Cist's weekly advertiser*, December 27, 1848; *House reports*, 30 congress, 1 session, 3: no. 733.

⁴⁵ *DeBow's review*, 3: 100.

pany for the carrying of mails from the west coast of Panama to Oregon, and on December 11, 1848, three members of this company, W. H. Aspinwall, J. L. Stephens, and Henry Chamly, presented through Douglas a memorial to the senate asking for a twenty-year mail contract over the road they were going to build across the isthmus. They already had a charter from New Granada; they would begin building in a year, and in three years would have it completed.⁴⁶ In the senate it was referred to the committee on military affairs with Jefferson Davis as chairman; both Douglas and Benton supported it. As the southern route claimed attention, Whitney began to write letters to show its impracticability by quoting from engineers who had been over the route in the Mexican war.⁴⁷

With the opening of the second session of the thirtieth congress the Whitney scheme again became a bone of contention. In the senate, on January 29, 1849, Niles moved to take up the Whitney bill of last session, which he said had been tabled for lack of time. Borland opposed this action and Foote of Mississippi offered an amendment that the road should go to Monterey or San Francisco.⁴⁸ In the house Pollock tried in vain to gain consideration for his bill of the previous session.⁴⁹ Nothing evidently was to be hoped for from congress, but Whitney gained a new convert in the person of Governor Floyd of Virginia, who wrote a public letter favoring the project.⁵⁰

In the spring of 1849 Whitney wrote and had published in New York an elaborate pamphlet entitled *Project for a railroad to the Pacific* in which he set forth his criticisms of the other roads now projected, declaring their terminals impossible and their routes impracticable. The bay of San Francisco, he said, was a mud flat and would never afford shipping facilities. This pamphlet the *American whig* review noticed in July and approved. As a rule Whitney found most of his support among the whigs.

With the coming of the year 1849 the railroad agitation grew more insistent. St. Louis had long had her ambitions for the

⁴⁶ *Senate miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 2 session, no. 1.

⁴⁷ *American railroad journal*, 21: 773.

⁴⁸ *Congressional globe*, 30 congress, 2 session, 382.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 congress, 2 session, 25.

⁵⁰ *Maysville Herald* (Kentucky), February 10, 1849.

terminal honors and she now actively entered the lists against Memphis, Natchez, and the Whitney terminal—wherever it should be—on Lake Michigan. Senator Benton, long a persistent opponent of a Pacific railway because of his friendship for western rivers, now became the most ardent advocate of it. He had been supporting the Panama project as a temporary route until a permanent road could be established and had been the most unsparing critic of Whitney. On February 7, 1849, he introduced into the senate a bill for a Pacific railway⁵¹ to run from St. Louis to San Francisco and to have a branch road to the mouth of the Columbia. The expense was to be met by the sale of public lands in California, Oregon, and elsewhere. It was to be a railway wherever possible and wherever a railway was impossible a macadamized road was to be built; military stations were to be built along the way and the road—government constructed—was to be turned over to private hands when completed. Benton in introducing his bill made a long speech in its behalf which became the text for the advocates of St. Louis as a terminal, although his plan was not the only one looking toward St. Louis. His bill was referred to the committee on military affairs and was reported by Benton March 2, too late for action.⁵² On February 24 there was presented to congress the memorial of Bayard for a railroad from St. Louis to the Pacific by the way of the Red and Gila rivers. A grant of land twenty-five miles wide on each side of the road was asked for. The route was to be surveyed by United States engineers and thirty days after the surveys were completed the memorialist pledged himself to deposit \$50,000,000 as a security for the completion of the road. The work was to be completed in eight years; iron rails were to be used, sixty pounds to the yard; and the mails were to be carried from Mississippi to California in four days or less.⁵³ Another scheme emanated from Boston where a certain De Grand organized a company with a capital of \$100,000,000 to build a railway from St. Louis to San Francisco. Of this amount the company was to furnish \$2,000,000 and was then to have the privilege of borrowing \$98,000,000 in

⁵¹ *Congressional globe*, 30 congress, 2 session, 473.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30 congress, 2 session, 625.

⁵³ *American railroad journal*, 22: 120.

United States six per cent stock.⁵⁴ De Grand claimed as a peculiar merit of his plan that nothing except cold water should be used by his employees as a stimulant while the road was being built.⁵⁵ On February 6, 1849, P. A. Hargous and others sent a petition to congress asking that the United States make no contract with other companies for carrying the mail to the Pacific, as they had a charter from Mexico for a railroad across Tehuantepec; their surveys were already made and the railroad would be built in a short time.⁵⁶ Finally Loughborough in the pages of the *Western Journal* advocated a road from St. Louis to San Francisco via the mouth of the Kansas, forks of the Platte, Fort Laramie, South Pass, Salt Lake City, and Humboldt river.⁵⁷

There were other routes and terminals claiming consideration but with less success in impressing public sentiment. As early as 1845 Douglas had proposed Chicago, Rock Island, Council Bluffs, and South Pass as a substitute for Whitney's route and had never changed his views. Illinois, however, in 1846 had instructed for Whitney and Douglas consequently had had his hands tied.⁵⁸ Like Benton he had in the senate advocated the Panama road as a temporary line till a permanent one could be built, but unlike Benton he wanted Chicago and not St. Louis for its eastern terminal. On January 24, 1849, seventy-seven citizens of Texas memorialized congress that the Galveston and Red river company might extend its lines to San Diego.⁵⁹

In the short session of congress nothing was done to forward any of these movements. A memorial from John Wilkes was referred to a select committee in the house and on February 20, this committee brought in a huge report of 678 printed pages, summing up and in general disapproving all the schemes then being advocated for a railroad. It advised a joint resolution for the survey of routes by the United States.⁶⁰

Outside congress there was waged during the summer and autumn of 1849 a vigorous and vociferous contest among the

⁵⁴ *Western Journal*, 2: 438.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3: 1.

⁵⁶ *Senate miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 2 session, no. 50.

⁵⁷ *Western Journal*, 2: 105.

⁵⁸ *Illinois State Register*, November 1, 1849.

⁵⁹ *Senate miscellaneous documents*, 30 congress, 2 session, no. 33.

⁶⁰ *House report*, 30 congress, 2 session, no. 145.

advocates of the different routes. Railroad meetings in Cincinnati and Columbus endorsed St. Louis.⁶¹ In the *Western Journal* Loughborough contended for his own plan and criticized all others. A committee on publicity in St. Louis had him write a pamphlet advocating the claims of St. Louis.⁶² The southern press stood mainly for Memphis; the *Charleston Mercury* urged that the Nashville road be extended on through Memphis to the Pacific.⁶³ The New Orleans papers continued to press the claims of an isthmus road as being better calculated to advance the interests of the Crescent city. The *Commercial Bulletin* attacked the Whitney route on the familiar grounds of lack of fuel, harsh climate, danger from Indians, and lack of trade. There was some demand for a railroad from the mouth of the Ohio; V. K. Stephenson, president of the Chattanooga and Nashville roads, advocated this,⁶⁴ saying that here was the head of navigation for first class boats in winter and that ultimately the Chattanooga and Nashville roads would extend to that point. Mobile, always hostile to Memphis, looked favorably on this idea.⁶⁵

Out of the maelstrom of differing views and jarring interests it was not likely that any result would soon come. In this emergency the west thought of its old weapon, the industrial convention, as a method of harmonizing views and initiating action. Such a convention had been held in Memphis in 1845⁶⁶ and another—a rivers and harbors convention—at Chicago in 1847.⁶⁷ Neither of these, to be sure, had been conspicuously successful in realizing the ambitions of its promoters, but they had at least made a deep impression on the minds of western people. And so in the spring of 1849, Memphis, at the instigation of the Arkansas legislature, sent out a call for a railroad convention. This convention, postponed on account of the cholera until October, was presided over by Lieutenant Maury and in spite of

⁶¹ *Ohio Statesman*, February 5, 1849.

⁶² *Western Journal*, 2: 386.

⁶³ *Charleston Mercury*, April 26, 1849.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1849.

⁶⁵ *Mobile Herald*, quoted in the *Commercial Bulletin*, September 20, 1849.

⁶⁶ St. George L. Sioussat, "Memphis, the gateway of the west," in *Tennessee historical magazine*, vol. 3.

⁶⁷ Robert Fergus, *Rivers and harbors convention*.

the protests of the gulf cities summed up its deliberations in a series of resolutions declaring for a railroad from Memphis to Monterey.⁶⁸ Three days before this meeting there was called to order in St. Louis a "National railroad convention" with Stephen A. Douglas in the chair. A bitter fight developed between Douglas and Benton which resulted practically in a victory for the former, and the convention declared for a railroad from San Francisco to Council Bluffs with branch lines to Chicago, St. Louis, and Memphis.⁶⁹

With the adjournment of these two conventions the first stage of the agitation for a Pacific railroad may be said to close. In the conflict of passions that raged around the omnibus bill, the south and even the west came to look upon railroads as matters very subordinate to sectionalism. The nationalistic spirit which had been invoked, if not displayed, by both the aforementioned conventions well nigh disappeared awhile even as an ideal. In time men came back to the railroad problem with calmer minds and began the movement of the fifties which is such a well-known part of our history.

The agitation of the forties led to no immediate result yet it was not without interest and even significance. Its importance lay in the fact that it was a beginning. In five years the ambition of a great people had become concentrated on having a railroad to the Pacific. This aspiration, obscured by the growth of sectionalism, did not grow less resolute in the next decade and when the time came for the actual building of the road, men's minds had been prepared for the undertaking by a long period of deliberation. The idea was no longer strange or the question unconsidered. It is noticeable, too, that the principal lines of the western roads today are built approximately over the routes whose relative merits formed the bone of contention from 1845-1850.

A reading of the railroad literature for this period affords many interesting glimpses of the life and thought of the time. In all the talk of building a railroad hardly a mention was made of the fact that such a road must run through lands belonging

⁶⁸ See R. S. Cotterill, "Memphis railroad convention, 1849," in *Tennessee historical magazine*, 4: 83-94, for a detailed account of this meeting.

⁶⁹ For a full account of the St. Louis convention see R. S. Cotterill, "National railroad convention in St. Louis, 1849," in *Missouri historical review*, 12: 203.

to the Indians. That this was a matter for consideration did not occur, apparently, either to promoter or advocate. The native was simply ignored. No proposition was made for organizing any part of his land as a territory preliminary to building a road over it. Suggestions were being made, of course, for organizing western territories, but they had small connection with the agitation for a railroad to the Pacific. The difference of interest between the gulf states and the upper south also makes itself evident. The strife between New Orleans and Memphis was quite as bitter as that between New Orleans and the lake cities. St. Louis no longer felt itself a southern city but was inclined to take middle ground between north and south in the economic war. Kentucky was inclined to the same course. The fight made by Chicago for consideration as a terminal might well be called a foreshadowing of what actually came to pass many decades later when this city became a meeting point of eastern and western roads. It foreshadowed, too, the great struggle for the northwest that was to have such an important bearing on the issues of the civil war. Finally, there is revealed clearly to us the stress that the democrat leaders of the day were under to harmonize their state rights theories with their advocacy of a railroad. It was out of this feeling that the Douglas plan for a railroad terminating outside of state boundaries was born and this feeling was responsible for the adoption of the idea by the St. Louis convention.

Nevertheless, in the railroad agitation of the forties one is struck most by the futility and impractical nature of the planning. The fundamental idea—Asiatic trade—can only be described by the word absurd. This trade was not then nor was it ever to be of such proportions as the enthusiasts imagined. Railroads built with it as chief objective must inevitably have gone into the hands of receivers. The other plan—that of supporting the railroad on the trade of the people who were to settle along the right of way—does more credit to the heart than to any other organ of the promoters. In fact the whole body of the commercial calculations of the promoters of this period would be overvalued if termed elementary. As we read their trade calculations it is difficult for us to believe that Whitney and Maury could have been the cool-headed successful business

men we know they were. Nor did they show themselves a whit more practical in their plans for constructing the roads. They underestimated the costs and even so dealt in figures far above the reach of the business world of their day. It is nothing short of inspiring to read how easily these men talked of millions to communities that would have been hard put to it to raise hundreds. Optimists they certainly were and had optimism been legal tender railroads would have girded both plain and desert before 1850. Perhaps the sarcastic comment of an English paper of the time may well close the story: "If, however, our friends should really get from the Mississippi to Oregon, it will be a thousand pities that they should stop there. A tubular bridge across Behring's strait would literally put a girdle round the earth—and then the predilection of American citizens might be gratified by the establishment of a perpetual circulation."⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ *Athenæum*, December 1, 1849.